Teachers and Students

Reflections on Learning in Near and Middle Eastern Cultures

COLLECTED STUDIES IN HONOUR OF SEBASTIAN GÜNTHER

EDITED BY

DOROTHEE PIELOW, JANA NEWIGER,

AND YASSIR EL JAMOUHI

ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION. STUDIES AND TEXTS

BRILL

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Found in Translation: Toward an Idiomatic Rendering of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's *Aphorisms*

Mohammed Rustom

This article discusses the kinds of challenges one faces when translating the famous *Ḥikam* of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh into English. It looks at ten examples from this classic of pre-modern Islamic civilization, arguing that it is most effective to employ a less literal and more idiomatic register of translation in order to properly convey the work's content and, equally important, its form.

A volume entitled *Teachers and Students* in honor of Professor Günther, one of our profession's most effective and caring pedagogues, is fitting indeed. In celebration of my dear friend and teacher and of the student-teacher relationship as such, in this article I will look at a major medieval Sufi teaching-text in Arabic. The focus will be upon the challenges and promises translators encounter when attempting to translate this work into idiomatic English, hoping to take its timeless insights to new pedagogical frontiers.

1 Introduction

Of all the pithy Arabic texts belonging to the Sufi tradition, few have been as influential as that of the *Ḥikam* (*Aphorisms*) by the Shādhilī master Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309).[1] One indicator of its widespread influence is the large number of commentaries that have been written upon it by such major figures as Ibn ʿAbbād al-Rundī (d. 792/1390),[2] Aḥmad al-Zarrūq (d. 899/1493),[3] Ibn ʿAjība (d. 1224/1809),[4] ʿAbdallāh Gangōhī (d. 1329/1921),[5]

1 For his life and thought, see Cook, *Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allah* and Nwyia, *Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh et la naissance*.

2 Al-Rundī, *al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*.

3 He has written over ten commentaries upon this work. See, for example, al-Zarrūq, *Sharḥ al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*.

4 Ibn ʿAjība, *Īqāẓ al-himam*.

5 This commentary is now available in English translation, alongside the Arabic text of the *Ḥikam* and an already-existing English translation. See Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh and Gangōhī, *The book of wisdoms*.

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Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 1434/2013),[6] and Fadhlalla Haeri (b. 1355/1937), who recently published an English-language commentary upon the book alongside a new translation.[7] To be sure, the *Ḥikam*'s fame is rightly deserved. In some 262 aphorisms of great beauty and profound spiritual insight, it enshrines all of the essentials of the Sufi path and has something to say to both Sufi neophytes and adepts.[8] At the same time, given the *Ḥikam*'s focus on the basic problems that plague the human condition, much of the book can speak to a broad spectrum of readers, regardless of their religious perspectives. It is therefore no surprise to find a wide range of translations of the *Ḥikam* into modern European languages.

When it came out over fifty years ago, Paul Nwyia's French translation and Arabic edition of the *Ḥikam* was very well received,[9] as was the translation of the *Ḥikam* into German by Professor Günther's compatriot and doyenne of Sufi studies Annemarie Schimmel.[10] Ever since the appearance of the first English translation of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's masterpiece in 1937,[11] many others have appeared. But no English translation has been as widely read and revered as that of the great Islamicist Victor Danner. His translation was first published in 1973,[12] and its revised and improved iteration was published in 1978 alongside Wheeler Thackston's translation of the Persian *Munājāt* (*Intimate prayers*) of ʿAbdallāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089).[13]

Every student of Sufism is indebted to Danner's translation of the *Ḥikam* and his helpful glosses that are based on the text's commentarial tradition. This explains why English translations of this work after 1978 have tended to rely, in one way or another, upon Danner's translation.[14] The goal of all English-language translators of the *Ḥikam* has therefore been uniform: to render this major work of the Sufi tradition in a way that is both accurate and faithful to

6 Al-Būṭī, *al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*. This commentary has been translated into several languages, including French and Malaysian.

7 Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, *The wisdom*.

8 Manuscripts of the *Ḥikam* group these aphorisms with two other short works by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, namely four letters to his students and over thirty prayers in the form of "intimate discourses" (*munājāt*). Therefore, these three works are also collectively known as the "*Ḥikam*," although the actual *Ḥikam* are the aphorisms per se.

9 See the second part of Nwyia, *Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh et la naissance*.

10 See Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, *Bedrängnisse*.

11 See Schimmel, *Mystical dimensions* 251, n. 37.

12 Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, *Ṣūfī aphorisms*.

13 Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh and Anṣārī, *The book of wisdom and intimate conversations*.

14 These translations include Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, *The book of aphorism*, *The Ḥikam* (which is accompanied by a translation of Ibn ʿAjība's commentary upon the *Ḥikam*), and *The wisdom of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī*.

the original. Yet, an important feature of the Arabic original is also absent from these translations, namely the *Ḥikam*'s unique *literary* merits. This is to say that the register of Arabic employed by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh in the *Ḥikam* is not somehow incidental to his message in this text but is an *essential* part of it. Like poetry, the *Ḥikam* speaks to the reader not only because of *what* it says, but also because of *how* it says it.

To convey the literary dimension of any work in translation while also being true to what the original is saying is of course a perennial challenge to translators. Two recent efforts that have been successful on this front are James Montgomery and Richard Sieburth's translation of the poetry attributed to ʿAntara[15] and William Chittick's translation of the Persian *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* (*The repose of spirits*) by Aḥmad Samʿānī (d. 534/1140).[16] Admittedly, the nature of the language of these works lends itself more readily to (or perhaps even demands) an idiomatic style of translation into English. While this may not be the case for every text, when a book's distinctive literary qualities can be communicated through an idiomatic translation, should an attempt not be made to do so?

Given that Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's *Ḥikam* is undoubtedly one such text, what follows is a short exercise that seeks to work through the problems inherent in translating it into natural English. The case studies are of ten aphorisms in total, and the method is rather straight-forward. For each aphorism, I first cite the Arabic text,[17] and then provide one possible literal translation and one possible less literal translation. Then, I explain how these translations simultaneously convey and obscure the point being made in the aphorism and suggest how these problems can be overcome in a more idiomatic translation, one example of which is then provided.

2 Case Studies

Aphorism # 1

١

مِنْ عَلَامَةِ الاِعْتِمَادِ عَلَى العَمَلِ نُقْصَانُ الرَّجَاءِ عِنْدَ وُجُودِ الزَّلَلِ

15 ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, *War songs*.

16 Samʿānī, *The repose*.

17 I follow the Arabic text in Ibn ʿAjība, *Īqāẓ al-himam*.

T1: Literal
"Among the signs of depending upon action is the loss of hope when there are slips."

T2: Less literal
"A sign of dependence upon action is the loss of hope when there is a slip."

Tension and Resolution
Some background discussion of the point being made in this aphorism is needed before delving into the peculiar problems one faces in translating it. A basic principle of the Sufi path is that one should never rely upon their own actions as efficacious, essentially speaking. If one comes to associate their actions with the great virtue of hope in God (*rajā'*), it would be tantamount to saying that he can only hope for God's mercy, divine favours, and the like insofar as he "does" the right kinds of things. In the face of error and sin, such an association will be crushed, resulting in his loss of hope in God. But the folly is in the initial perspective: the only reason a person who sins loses hope in God is because he sees a necessary connection between his own actions and God's good-pleasure. In effect, such a person has more hope in "his" own efforts than in God's goodness and mercy. This is a subtle form of selfish egoism that is contrary to the Sufi emphasis upon a person's utter nothingness and absolute dependence upon God alone.

The sense of agency (and urgency) in the aphorism is arguably lost in T1 and T2. While there is no clear-cut subject in the Arabic, a reader of the original would recognize that the subject in question is himself/herself. While T1 and T2 convey the problematic well, they do not capture the rhetorical and matter-of-fact nature of the Arabic. Hence, the reflexivity implied by the aphorism when carried over into English in both T1 and T2 is missing where it should be present. By introducing the second person pronoun in the translation (see T3), the directness of the aphorism—i.e., that it "speaks" to a particular person and kind of reader—can be retained. This also means that the sense of some abstract "dependence on action" is replaced by a concrete, particular person who depends on his/her actions.

In Arabic, the singular *'amal* and the plural *zalal* are in contraposition to one another, and they rhyme. If we have "action" and "slip" as in T2, another rhetorical dimension of the Arabic aphorism is lost in translation. The problem can perhaps be overcome by pairing the English words "action" and "sin," as in T3.

T3: Idiomatic
"A sign that you depend on action is that you lose hope when you sin."

Aphorism # 21

٢١

طَلَبُكَ مِنْهُ اِتِّهَامٌ لَهُ وَطَلَبُكَ لَهُ غَيْبَةٌ مِنْكَ عَنْهُ
وَطَلَبُكَ لِغَيْرِهِ لِقِلَّةِ حَيَائِكَ مِنْهُ وَطَلَبُكَ مِنْ غَيْرِهِ لِوُجُودِ بُعْدِكَ عَنْهُ

T1: Literal
"Your requesting Him is suspicion of Him and your seeking Him is an absence from you of Him. Your seeking other than Him is because of the little shame you have of Him, and your requesting other than Him is because of the existence of your distance from Him."

T2: Less literal
"Your demanding Him is suspicion of Him and your seeking Him is absence from Him. But your seeking other than Him is because of your lack of shame before Him, and your demanding other than Him is because of your distance from Him."

Tension and Resolution
This particular aphorism is problematic because of its two different uses of the single word *ṭalab*. In the first and last instances it carries the sense of requesting and demanding something from someone, and in the second and third that of searching for and seeking someone. T2's rendering of *ṭalab* as "demanding" is certainly an improvement on T1's "requesting." This is because "demanding" conveys a clearer sense of what Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh is saying, namely that when we make demands of God (and he may have in mind something like "continual" or "nagging" ones), it is due to our short-sightedness of God's providence and care and is ultimately symptomatic of our suspicion of Him, which is akin to the Sufi concept of *sūʾ al-ẓann bi-llāh* or "having an ugly opinion of God."

In light of the above point, the idea conveyed by T1 and T2, that *ṭalab* is *itself* suspicion, is therefore in need of correcting, since *ṭalab* is the effect as opposed to being synonymous with the cause of suspicion. If one accepts this line of reasoning, then the other three instances of *ṭalab* will also require the qualification, "is because of" or "on account of."

If the copula in the expressions "Your demanding x is y" and "Your seeking x is y" carries the sense of a cause, then for simple stylistic reasons in English we cannot retain the "your" in these instances. It would be awkward to say, "Your demanding Him is because of suspicion of Him," or, "Your making demands of Him is because of suspicion of Him."

What makes for better and more correct form and style, and which is equally if not better at conveying the sense of the Arabic "any time that you …," would be the English "whenever" or simply "when."

T3: Idiomatic
"When you make demands of Him it is because of your suspicion of Him, and when you seek Him it is because you are absent from Him. But when you seek other than Him it is because of your lack of shame before Him, and when you make demands of other than Him it is because of your distance from Him."

Aphorism # 61

٦١

مَا قَادَكَ شَيْءٌ مِثْلُ الوَهْمِ

T1: Literal
"Nothing leads you like illusion."

T2: Less literal
"Nothing leads you on like illusion."

Tension and Resolution
The problem of illusion (*wahm*), which in Sufi texts is a negative human quality of the soul as opposed to simply being an estimative epistemological faculty, is accurately conveyed by both T1 and T2. Yet T2 is an improvement on T1 because of the added "on," which then gives a clearer sense of why illusion is detrimental to a person's soul. That is to say that it is not so much that illusion is a poor leader or guide for a person as much as it is that illusion deludes him, and hence "leads" him in the wrong direction.

If a person is being misled by illusion, he is presumably taking steps in accordance with his skewed vision of reality. Hence, he is not only being led on by it but is being tricked and deceived by it, which is tantamount to saying that he is fooling himself since his illusion is rooted in his ego and selfish insistence on the (false) nature of the way things really are. In idiomatic English we would say that such a person is not being "led on" or "cheated" by his illusion, but is being "taken for a ride" by it, as in T3. The verb *qāda* also carries with it the sense of riding and being ridden upon, which would accord well with T3.

T3: Idiomatic
"Nothing takes you for a ride like illusion."

Aphorism # 62

٦٢

أَنْتَ حُرٌّ مِمَّا أَنْتَ عَنْهُ آيِسٌ وَعَبْدٌ لِمَا أَنْتَ لَهُ طَامِعٌ

T1: Literal
"You are free of that toward which you despair and a slave of that toward which you covet."

T2: Less literal
"You are free from what you have despair over and a slave of what you covet."

Tension and Resolution
The active sense of "despair" in both T1 and T2 is a very literal translation of *āyis*. Of course, the aphorism has nothing to do with despair, which is a negative quality. The idea here, which is very positive, has more to do with a person's "letting go of" and "relinquishing" her psychological attachment to the world, her sense of self, people, things, etc. It is this sense of *ya's* that is employed in the famous Prophetic statement, *wa-ajmiʿ al-ya's ʿan mā fī aydī al-nās*,[18] which means something like, "Do not expect anything from people" and not, "Resolve to have despair over what people have."

Translating the *min mā* as "from what" only works in T2 because of the way *āyis* has been (incorrectly) rendered. As with the case of aphorism # 21 above, it would be best to introduce a "when" or "whenever" into the translation in place of *min mā* and *li-mā*. But, to read better in English, this also requires translating the active participles *āyis* and *ṭāmiʿ* as verbs.

T3: Idiomatic
"You are free when you let go, but a slave when you crave."

Aphorism # 126

١٢٦

مَنَعَكَ أَنْ تَدَّعِيَ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ مِمَّا لِلْمَخْلُوقِينَ
أَفَيُبِيحُ لَكَ أَنْ تَدَّعِيَ وَصْفَهُ وَهُوَ رَبُّ العَالَمِينَ

18 Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, Zuhd 15, no. 4310.

T1: Literal
"He has forbidden you to lay claim to that which you do not have of what creatures have. So, will He allow you to lay claim to His description when He is the Lord of the worlds?"

T2: Less literal
"He has forbidden you to claim qualities that you do not have but which creatures have. So, will He allow you to claim His quality, while He is the Lord of the worlds?"

Tension and Resolution
This aphorism is particularly challenging to translate because it probably reads best in English when featured as a rhetorical statement in the form of, "If not x, then why ever y?" On the face of it, this does a certain violence to the original Arabic, since that is not the way the question—albeit rhetorical—is framed. But, as T1 and T2 show, the introductory words "So will He …" in the second clause present something of a discontinuity with the first clause that does not seem felicitous to the ear in English. At any rate, the "So will He …" is tantamount to the idiomatic, "Do you think that He would?" On that score alone, introducing the hypothetical "if" would seem justified if not necessary, which is to say nothing of the effective force of a rhetorical question wherein the reader is asked to think about the point at hand.

T1 and T2 seem to suggest that the sense of the aphorism's first line is that one has been forbidden by God to claim something that people "have." The sense of the Arabic, however, is clearly that a person is not allowed to claim for himself those qualities that people (including himself) *can* have, but which he does not have. This points up the absurdity of the person's attempt to claim for himself a quality that God (which excludes people and himself) *does* have, and which he can never have.

T3: Idiomatic
"If you are forbidden to claim a quality you do not have but that people can have, do you think you will be allowed to claim a quality that only belongs to the Lord of the worlds?"

Aphorism # 128

١٢٨

مَا الشَّأْنُ وُجُودِ الطَّلَبِ إِنَّمَا الشَّأْنُ أَنْ تُرْزَقَ حُسْنَ الأَدَبِ

T1: Literal
"The matter is not the existence of seeking. The matter is only that you be sustained with proper conduct."

T2: Less literal
"Seeking is not the matter. Rather, it is that you be sustained with good conduct."

Tension and Resolution
The translation of *wujūd* in T1 is not necessary or called for, and the term assumes no technical significance in the passage. It is thus excised in T2, and the same point is made there, if not more felicitously. As for "the matter" to translate *mā sha'n*, although correct and even somewhat idiomatic in English, taking this or a related option does cancel out another possible idiomatic expression that accords much better with English usage and which is also true to the Arabic aphorism: "it is not so much about x as it is about y …" (see T3).

Now, what does it mean to be "sustained" with correct conduct (*adab*)? What is lost in even a literal translation of the verb is that one's *rizq* or sustenance is a blessing given to her by God, and to have the spiritual sustenance of proper *adab* is one of the highest of divine gifts. As the famous Sufi adage has it, "All of Sufism is *adab*." Apart from the T1 and T2, I am at a loss at how this point can be communicated without a lengthy and involved footnote to the translation. And, as one thinks through what is at stake here, one wonders if the mention of a person's being "sustained" is at all necessary or essential in conveying the point of this aphorism.

It would certainly go against Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's intention not to mention the bestowed nature of the gift of *adab*, which as he notes occupies a higher place than that of seeking (*ṭalab*)–the reasons for this are obvious, since seeking itself is a form of divine gift and is predicated on the right kind of outward and inward comportment, which is precisely what *adab* is. As a resolution, T3 suggests conveying the notion of the "gifting" of beautiful conduct (note that *ḥusn* conveys the sense of "beauty," not "goodness") while avoiding the language of "sustenance," which may be foreign to English ears.

T3: Idiomatic
"It is not so much about seeking as it is about being gifted with beautiful conduct."

Aphorism # 129

١٢٩

مَا طَلَبَ لَكَ شَيْءٌ مِثْلُ الاِضْطِرَارِ
وَلَا أَسْرَعُ بِالمَوَاهِبِ إِلَيْكَ مِثْلُ الذِّلَّةِ وَالاِفْتِقَارِ

T1: Literal
"Nothing makes a request for you like need, and nothing is quicker in bringing you divinely bestowed gifts like lowliness and poverty."

T2: Less literal
"Nothing makes a request for you like utter need, and nothing more quickly brings divinely bestowed gifts to you like lowliness and poverty."

Tension and Resolution
T1 and T2 are close to one another and are accurate. This aphorism presents us with an exquisite rhyme in Arabic that can be retained naturally in translation, but not a translation that hews too closely to the Arabic text. One has to be creative if the punch and rhyme of the original is to be retained, but finding the right words or cluster of words to convey *iḍṭirār* and *iftiqār* in English is rather challenging. And this challenge is even greater by virtue of the fact that these two words in Sufi technical parlance come close to one another in sense and usage. A cue on how to approach things in an idiomatically-oriented English translation can be taken from the aphorism's emphasis on *ṭalab* or requesting. And *iḍṭirār* pairs well with *ṭalab*, since when a person is *muḍṭarr* he is like a beggar, pleading, requesting, and knocking at the door, hoping to be let in.

T3: Idiomatic
"Nothing asks for you like need knocking at the door, and nothing brings you divine gifts faster than being lowly and poor."

Aphorism # 144

١٤٤

أَجْهَلُ النَّاسِ مَنْ تَرَكَ يَقِينَ مَا عِنْدَهُ لِظَنِّ مَا عِنْدَ النَّاسِ

T1: Literal
"The most ignorant of people is one who leaves the certainty that is with him for the conjecture that is with people."

T2: Less literal
"The most ignorant person is one who leaves his certainty for the conjecture of other people."

Tension and Resolution
T2 conveys quite well what is happening in the aphorism, but it does pose one difficulty that is not easily overcome if one insists on translating *taraka* as "to leave" or "to relinquish." We can say in English that someone "leaves x for y," but since the subject of this aphorism is a fool and an ignoramus and indeed the worst of them, would it not be more vivid an image in English to speak of such a person as not only "leaving" his certainty for the conjecture of others, but as effectively *replacing* their conjecture with his certainty?

T3: Idiomatic
"The most ignorant person is one who replaces his certainty with someone else's conjecture."

Aphorism # 209

٢٠٩

مَا فَاتَ مِنْ عُمُرِكَ لَا عِوَضَ لَهُ وَمَا حَصَلَ لَكَ مِنْهُ لَا قِيمَةَ لَهُ

T1: Literal
"Whatever of your life that has passed cannot be compensated for, and what is left of it for you does not have a price."

T2: Less literal
"Whatever of your life that has passed cannot be returned, and what is left of it for you is priceless."

Tension and Resolution
The sense of *lā ʿiwaḍa lahu* here is that what has passed of one's life cannot be returned (T2) and/or that it will never come back (T3). But the second clause, when idiomatically translated as consequent to the proposition laid out in the

first clause (as in T3), presents us with an entirely different mood, namely an urgent one. Admittedly, this mood may or may not be the intended sense of the Arabic.

T3: Idiomatic
"Whatever of your life that has passed will never come back, so what remains is priceless."

Aphorism # 211

٢١١

لَا تَنْفَعُهُ طَاعَتُكَ وَلَا تَضُرُّهُ مَعْصِيَتُكَ
وَإِنَّمَا أَمَرَكَ بِهِذِهِ وَنَهَاكَ عَنْ هذِهِ لِمَا يَعُودُ عَلَيْكَ

T1: Literal
"Your act of obedience does not benefit Him, and your act of disobedience does not harm Him. He commanded one for you and forbade the other from you only because of what returns to you."

T2: Less literal
"Your act of obedience does not benefit Him, nor does your act of disobedience harm Him. He commanded you to do one and forbade you from the other only on account of what will come back to you."

Tension and Resolution
Although there has historically been much debate over precisely the issue surrounding "why" God commands people to do certain actions and to avoid others, this aphorism presents us with a rather common understanding of the *raison d'être* of the commandments of the *sharīʿa*: beautiful actions benefit the doer and ugly ones harm him. With this in mind, translating the phrase *limā yaʿūdu ilayka* literally as in T1 and even less literally as in T2, do a gross injustice to this perspective. For it is not so much a question of an abstract "what returns" or "what will come back to a person" as much as it is a question of the concrete effects of these actions that go back to that person. And they do not simply "go back" to him. Rather, they *rebound* upon him in accordance with the ineluctable spiritual law of cause and effect.

T3: Idiomatic

"Your obedient acts do not benefit Him, nor do your disobedient acts harm Him. He only commands you to do one and forbids you from the other because of the effects that will rebound upon you."

3 Conclusion

It is my hope that the above exercise has been able to convey a sense of the problems that one perforce encounters in any attempt to produce an idiomatic translation of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's *Ḥikam*. The challenge of course is to let this work's message come across in English with respect to both *content* and, to the extent possible, *form*. I believe this can be done, and the methods suggested in this essay represent but one possibility among other creative ways of doing so. Apart from making a Sufi classic available in a new English medium, this endeavor also poses advantages for readers outside of the field of Arabic and Islamic studies. A more idiomatic English version of the *Ḥikam* may one day break out onto the scene of what Professor Günther's other compatriot Goethe first referred to as *Weltliteratur*.[19] After all, the *Ḥikam*'s message is timeless and universal and therefore belongs to the common heritage of humanity. For us readers today, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh's aphorisms can even cause us to ponder over and address many of our own modern concerns. Chief among these would probably be the need to rise above the clamor of our technologized societies in favor of cultivating stillness of mind and self-knowledge.

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DOROTHEE PIELOW (LAUER)
is an academic staff member at the University of Göttingen's Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies. In 1994, she received her Ph.D. in Arabic studies and Ethnology from this university and has held several academic appointments since then, including one in the Database of Classical Islamic Pedagogy project in Göttingen. Her current research focuses on the history of the occult sciences and magic in Islam.

JANA NEWIGER
is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Göttingen. She received her MA from the University of Göttingen in 2015. Her current research focuses on the intellectual and theological history of early Ibadism.

YASSIR EL JAMOUHI
is an assistant professor in the Department of German Studies at the Hassan II University of Casablanca. From 2015 to 2019, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the Collaborative Research Centre 1136 "Education and Religion" at the University of Göttingen. He received his Ph.D. in 2015 from the University of Göttingen. His current research focuses on discourse and dialogue analysis, intercultural communication as well as Islamic ethics and education.

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